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Maneuvering for Paper: Physical and Social Experiences of Bureaucracy in
Venezuelan Amazonia

By

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ABSTRACT

This article explores an apprenticeship in bureaucracy that the Venezuelan Sanema have experienced through their participation in the projects of the late Hugo Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution. The analysis focuses on the maneuverability that paperwork engenders, and thus contributes to an understanding of mobility and corporeal experiences of state apparatus in contemporary Amazonia. New patterns of movement—travel to and from cities, daily errands, and maneuvering within social spheres—must be understood with reference to the state and its bureaucratic pervasiveness, but also as congruous with customary practices of “journeying for knowledge,” which forge an intimate link between physical and social mobility. The new maneuverability that is both prompted and necessitated by the current political setting is equally as important as literacy in navigating bureaucratic structures and accessing state resources.

KEYWORDS: Amazonia, bureaucracy, mobility, Venezuela

RESUMEN

El presente artículo explora un caso de aprendizaje de la burocracia venezolana, que los Sanema experimentan a través de su participación en los proyectos sociales de la Revolución Bolivariana de Chávez. Este análisis se enfoca en la capacidad de maniobra que genera el papeleo burocrático, y contribuye a la comprensión de las formas de movilidad y la experiencia del Estado de manera somática en la Amazonía contemporánea. Los nuevos patrones de movimiento que involucran un desplazamiento hacia y desde las ciudades, los trámites cotidianos y maniobras efectuadas en diversas esferas sociales, no solo deben entenderse en relación con el Estado y su omnipresencia burocrática, sino también como prácticas congruentes con las costumbres tradicionales de “viajar en busca de conocimiento” que involucran un vínculo estrecho entre movilidad física y social. Así, los Sanema utilizan la

experiencia burocrática adquirida en este ambiente político para conseguir sus propios objetivos, en lugar de aquellos del Estado.

PALABRAS CLAVES: Amazonía, burocracia, movilidad, Venezuela

Marco, a member of the Amazonian Sanema, carefully slid the contents of a large envelope out of its protective sleeve and onto the table in front of us, as though it were an exceedingly valuable object. He finally had in his possession what he had been striving to obtain for months—“*la guía*”—precious documents necessary for his future enterprise of transporting and selling gasoline to the gold mines upstream. On the table lay a stack of papers neatly held together with a paperclip. A small photocopy of an ID card on the top displayed a faded image of someone I did not recognize, and beneath it lay several stamped and signed layers of immaculately preserved forms, letters, and receipts. “I finally have it!” Marco beamed triumphantly. “Now I can peacefully pass the military with my gasoline.” He was clearly relieved by the newfound freedom that this paperwork facilitated, as it authorized him to travel along the rivers with large quantities of gasoline in his possession. In fact, this *guía* paperwork powerfully indexed two pertinent new phenomena increasingly experienced in Amazonian life—bureaucracy and mobility.

This article explores a complex journey through the workings of Venezuelan politics that led Marco to this moment with the *guía*—an apprenticeship in paperwork that began with the arrival of the late Hugo Chavez’s Bolivarian Revolution. It argues that maneuverability, both prompted and necessitated by the current political setting, is equally as important as literacy in navigating bureaucratic structures and accessing state resources. The term maneuverability is here used to encapsulate the extensive journeying that one must undertake, the bodily movements required to master daily bureaucratic techniques, and the social mobility that emerges from increased participation in complex social networks and collaboration with politically powerful actors. However, a proclivity for maneuverability is far from new; it has roots in a long-established moral endeavor associated with the pursuit of fertile exterior knowledge.

Alternative approaches to the study of the state have recently attempted to challenge conventional portrayals of an omnipotent, reified, and unitary entity.

Instead, they offer insights into the dispersed, heterogeneous, and opaque sets of everyday administrative practices that constitute what had hitherto been regarded as a self-evident phenomenon (Abrams 1988; Blom Hansen and Stepputat 2001: 14; Das and Poole 2004). Whether or not the concept is reified, however, bureaucracy remains its linchpin, and indeed, according to Sharma and Gupta, paperwork is the material medium through which “the state comes to be imagined, encountered, and reimagined by the population” (2006: 12). The fact that systems of governance are substantiated in written records in this way has clear implications for such mechanisms not only in matters of control and “standardization” (Scott 1998), but also in their potential permanence and ability to be manipulated. The efficacy of bureaucratic documents, Hull (2012) suggests, lies in their capacity as mediators of meaning, as well as their ability to index power, personhood, and ideologies beyond their text or representations. As such, it may come as little surprise to discover that fetishism of certain documents such as the ID card seems to be a particular feature of indigenous peoples’ experiences with bureaucracy and the state in Latin America (see Guzmán-Gallegos 2009). Gordillo (2006) has noted, for example, that among the Argentinian Chaco, certain documents generate a particular subjectivity in relation to the nation state, and that their material quality is thought to bestow a magical essence with the power to protect from violence and enable great wealth. Nevertheless, bureaucratic practices are more than just documents, but are defined by routine administrative procedures and repetitive techniques of red tape, a unique set of skills that accompany literacy and writing (Goody 1986); which in Amazonia gives precedence to maneuverability.

Alongside a close examination of the use of official papers in modern nation-states comes the recognition that a new mobility is both required and fuelled by this material component of citizenship. As official documentation gradually became a pervasive phenomenon towards the end of the nineteenth century in Europe, it came to be associated with the mobility of persons within and between frontiers. Torpey has pointed out that through documentation, the state progressively encroached on everyday freedom to move across space, resulting in “the possession of an ‘identity’ from which [one] cannot escape and which may significantly shape ... access to various spaces” (1998: 239). Documents became the material manifestation of this regulation of movement, most discernably at borders and checkpoints (Kelly 2006),

but also in more subtle actions that result from participation in everyday bureaucratic techniques and routine engagement in state initiatives. Indeed, when analyzing bureaucracy, we come to see that the daily corporeal practices involved are as significant as the papers themselves, underscoring the power that documentation has to impress on intimate experiences of movement, passage, and access within the state apparatus. Lund elegantly illustrates this type of corporeal experience of bureaucracy in Cuzco, Peru, where she describes the intricate bodily encounters of document processing that provide Peruvians “with an embodied experience of the state that forms their subjective experience of the self” (2001: 20).

Likewise, the incorporation of indigenous peoples into state-building objectives is often accompanied by a surge of movement towards centralized state entities (see Alexiades and Peluso 2015). This increased mobility is most evident in accounts of indigenous activism—the archetypal indian–state encounter—that involves what Conklin and Graham describe as a mobilization “of political actions across wide gulfs of distance, language, and culture” (1995: 696). Descriptions of Amerindian political movements are brimming with tales of their astonishing acceleration of maneuverability in the political context: from migration to and regular demonstrations within the cities, to global speaking tours, and even meetings with world leaders and celebrities (Conklin 1997). The case presented here, however, is not one of a mobilization in which indigenous organizations seek recognition or influence within the wider political setting, but rather one of the mobility that must be undertaken in order to participate in the fertile projects offered by the Venezuelan state. The Bolivarian Revolution has played a central role in accelerating regular and extended mobility in Venezuelan Amazonia due to gifts of outboard motors, profuse political activities in the cities, grassroots development projects that require regular errands, and frequent paperwork submission. Despite their remote location in the forests of Southern Venezuela and Northern Brazil, the Sanema—a hunting and horticultural Yanomami language group—have found themselves recently lured into the bureaucratic ubiquity of the state. In this article I will outline the apprenticeship in documentation experienced by residents of two Sanema communities in Venezuelan Amazonia; one relatively close to non-indigenous *criollo*¹ society, which I call Maduaña, and another community further south in the more remote headwater regions

of Amazonia, which I call Ulinuwiña.² In particular, I will be exploring the mobility that bureaucracy and state activities both impel and demand among the residents of these two communities; and by couching the experiences as an apprenticeship, it is possible to discern that, if mastered, papers can offer a wide range of opportunities peripheral to state patronage.

Paper for Fuel

The opening vignette of this article comes at the end of the story, as it were. The confidence and skills necessary for Marco to procure the *guía* were a result of many years rehearsing the art of bureaucracy, a prerequisite for participation in Chavez's Bolivarian Revolution. I shall continue briefly with the story of the *guía* in order to give a sense of the pervasiveness of bureaucracy in the everyday lives of the Sanema, and above all how it calls for extensive physical and social maneuverability.

Referred to locally as "*La guía*" (in full—*La guía de control de circulación de combustible*: the "guide to control of fuel circulation"), the paperwork that Marco was so impatient to get hold of was a state-conferred dossier of forms that confirm legal procurement and transit of goods; in this case, gasoline. Officially, the papers prove that barrels of gasoline were purchased legitimately as part of a government authorized *cupo* (quota), which, in the case of indigenous peoples, is a bulk quantity obtained for use in communal outboard motors, generators, grass trimmers, chainsaws, and so on. However, in reality gasoline is not used for communal purposes alone, and this specific paperwork was often sought to facilitate the free passage of copious quantities of gasoline upriver to be exchanged for gold in the mines.

Wildcat gold mining was prevalent in southern Venezuela during my fieldwork and had been on the rise for many years, creating a huge demand for gasoline, which is used to power the high-pressure water cannons that blast off the topsoil to access the gold sediments beneath. Meeting this demand was a potential source of immense income for many Sanema, so much so that the mine site became known jokingly among them as "the central bank of Venezuela." Furnishing the mine with the copious quantities of gasoline required to run these machines, though, necessitated laborious processes of acquisition and bureaucracy in the cities, not to mention a hazardous and strenuous journey to transport the fluid to the mine. It was

the combination of these factors that made the price paid for gasoline at the mine site so inflated. By some accounts, a good day could potentially see a trader walking away from the mine with 10,000 Bs.F. worth of gold for each 200-liter barrel exchanged (equivalent to approximately US\$1,250 at the time), even though under normal circumstances gasoline is highly subsidized in Venezuela and costs as little as US\$0.02 per liter when acquired at the gas station.³ Given that in one trip a canoe may even manage to transport up to 10 barrels at a time, weighed down by the hefty load, the result is the potential to accumulate wealth of unprecedented proportions.⁴

Dreams of procuring these riches, however, were not as easy to realize as they first appeared. Many communities had their monthly quota, and consequently also their rights to a *guía*, temporarily revoked when discovered by the military repeatedly transporting unaccounted-for quantities of gasoline upstream. As a result, some communities were entitled neither to buy (without their quota) nor transport (without a *guía*) substantial quantities of the precious fluid. Even if they were able to purchase it on the black market, without the *guía*, gasoline's mobility is hindered, since the increasingly prolific military checkpoints lining the rivers now demand to see this paperwork from anyone travelling upstream. Without it, the barrels of gasoline are at risk of being confiscated. For this reason countless people spoke of the *guía* and of their eagerness to obtain one.

This is how I came to find myself accompanying Marco, the *jefe* (chief) of Maduaña, to the *criollo* town of Pijiguao, in search of this much sought-after paperwork. I had joined him on this "*diligencia*"—an increasingly prevalent Spanish term used to describe administrative errands—only to find that the days passed with agonizing inactivity. "Paperwork, paperwork, so much paperwork," Marco grumbled during one of our days of waiting; a statement that seemed rather odd given that he had spent almost no time up to that point filling out forms or processing papers. This time, he explained, he was looking for someone who had a *guía* that they would be willing to sell to him, having attempted all other avenues available to him. He spent many days walking around Pijiguao visiting contacts he had come to know through his frequent trips to the town, asking if they might be able to help. Some had directed to him to people they knew, and they had directed him on to others still. Several gave him some glimmer of hope but stated that they were waiting for some phase in the paperwork process to be completed. The delay was often due to an impasse in one of

the steps in the bureaucratic process, be it in registration on the infamous “*lista*” (the official list of indigenous communities entitled to a quota of gasoline each month), in procuring a letter from the lieutenant of the *Guardia Nacional* (National Guard), or in the receipt of one in a number of official stamps. On the rare days that Marco had a lead, or that some stage in the paperwork procedure seemed to be moving forward, he would appear at my hammock smartly dressed in what seemed like a freshly washed and pressed polo shirt, jeans, and shoes. His new orderly appearance was accompanied by a stern sense of purpose as he strode off to “meet with a man,” often of the powerful Ye’kwana indigenous people, or a *criollo* acquaintance who might help him find a *guía* that he so desired.⁵

Eventually, the waiting paid off, and a few weeks later he was able to buy the bulk of the documentation from a Ye’kwana man, Hernán, for a fee. The *guía* paperwork had been completed, stamped, and photocopied, so that all Marco needed to do was purchase the gasoline and compose a letter stating that he would be transporting the gasoline to the Ye’kwana community on Hernán’s behalf, which Hernán would then countersign. All things considered, this errand was relatively straightforward for Marco, as the forms were already completed. All that was required of him were contacts in the cities, funds to buy the *guía* from this Ye’kwana man, and patience. With the *guía* in hand, Marco’s mobility within the region was at last liberated. He would no longer have his gasoline confiscated, no longer be viewed with suspicion by the checkpoint personnel, and would not have to anxiously conjure up an intricate story for the military as to his reasons for travelling with several large barrels of gasoline.

Although Marco was not actually compiling the papers himself, this particular execution of bureaucracy through brokers and the days of waiting were important aspects of his maneuverability within the new administrative regime, as I shall describe in greater detail below. Crucially, however, and as alluded to above, this procurement of the *guía* was not the beginning of Marco’s experience with paperwork. On the contrary, he had over the years become quite confident in the workings of bureaucracy, and this latest quest was just one in a number of similar pursuits he had come to perform daily. His apprenticeship in bureaucracy had begun with the Bolivarian Revolution.

A Revolution of Goods

“‘Revolution’ means lots of new things,” Marco exclaimed one day in response to a question I had put to him about the Bolivarian Revolution. He continued:

On the TV they say “thank you for the revolution!” the women say. They have lots of cars and other things. New houses, lots of things. New things all the time! This is revolution. They create new things; new factories make things that we didn’t have before.

It struck me that Marco’s statement had emphasized the unceasing flow of industrial goods in his description of the Bolivarian Revolution. And yet, it also seemed quite logical that he might identify the current socialist epoch as one of increased commodities, particularly for an indigenous people who had very little access to such things in the past. Most Sanema who discussed politics with me associated the Bolivarian government with the receipt of political gifts, and for many it was the “new things” they acquired that defined the increasingly familiar terms “socialism” and “revolution.” Even as Marco responded, he was squatting on the earth floor near his hearth eating an arepa (Venezuelan cornmeal flatbread) made with government-subsidized flour, wearing a red t-shirt with large white letters that read “*Si con Chavez!*”⁶ and having recently returned from a trip to the city where he had collected a free manioc grating machine from the local representatives of the ruling United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

Chavez’s regime, known as the Bolivarian Revolution, was elected to power in 1998 and thereafter initiated an intensified integration of indigenous peoples into state mechanisms through a new ideology of participatory democracy, endogenous development, and its hallmark grassroots projects. The channeling of this so-called “magical state’s” (Coronil 1997) great oil wealth into social services that provide free healthcare, education, housing and subsidized food (see Smilde and Hellinger 2011) generated an immense following among the nation’s most disenfranchised population, not least of whom were the all-but-forgotten indigenous peoples. For the first time in the country’s history, the indigenous population gained recognition, most notably in changes to the 1999 Venezuelan Constitution which introduced a section devoted to

native peoples; including clauses that espouse rights to collective land ownership, native education and health practices, and prior consultation for natural resource extraction in their territory. A ministry—*El Ministerio del Poder Popular para los Pueblos Indígenas* (The Ministry of Popular Power for Indigenous Peoples, hereafter “the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples”)—was established to attend to these rights. Notwithstanding this multi-ethnic vision, however, Chavez simultaneously directed attention to indigenous people’s history of exclusion and thus promoted their incorporation into *criollo*-standardized development initiatives, involvement in party politics, and their equal participation in the grassroots projects of Bolivarianism.

In everyday terms, gifts and the direct supply of funds for projects figure prominently in Sanema descriptions of their motivations for migrating northwards, their regular trips to the cities, and their participation in political activities. My host brother described the elation with which the first donations were received: “The first thing we got was a metal boat with a motor attached, and the people saw that and cried out with excitement, ‘Let’s vote for Chavez because he gives us things!’” Given that the bestowal of goods is often associated with kinship obligations, many of my interlocutors described Chavez as their father (*ipa hawani*), not merely in the sense of the “father of the revolution,” but more specifically as a benefactor whose role it is to care for them in a material way. Indeed, the Sanema term used for Bolivarian projects—*pasila palai*—also means “to help,” a term that is also associated with the alleviation of poverty and suffering (*pebalo*), and a crucial responsibility of devoted and compassionate kin (see also Alès 2000). A number of Sanema also described Chavez’s ethnic heritage as indigenous, which was regarded as the reason why he felt a special compulsion to be “*pendiente*” (looks out) for them. One man told me, “He is *indio*, his father was *indio*. When he grew up he remembered this. So now he loves *indios*.”⁷

It was with this enthusiasm and desire for manufactured goods that the Sanema embarked on an encounter with the state and its offer of “help.” The first stage of their apprenticeship was a journey through the bureaucratic regime, starting with the procurement of a *cedula* (ID card) and registration as voting citizens. Subsequently, however, from the perspective of these indigenous actors, this first document was also the first step towards a new rapid and regular mobility in which many frequently travelled to the cities in order to receive political gifts and participate

in government-initiated activities, such as health workshops and meetings about bilingual education. On many occasions I accompanied the residents of Maduaña to receive political donations in the town of Pijiguao. They would sit on plastic seats in the scorching town square with throngs of other indigenous peoples while the *chavista*⁸ mayor of the town made long speeches over an extravagant sound system about helping indigenous communities to “advance.” After the political display, the crowds would form a chaotic line grasping their folders of paperwork and ID cards, ready to receive their donations. During one such event, astonishingly large heaps of shiny new goods were waiting at the edges of the square—machetes, wheelbarrows, chainsaws, two-way radios, grass trimmers, and outboard motors—each pile labeled with the name of the community to which they were allocated.

Despite the aim of Bolivarian grass-roots development to mark a move away from this type of clientelism—which had been characteristic of earlier Venezuelan governments—political donations to supporters at the local level continue to be deep-seated in the current regime. During the run-up to elections in particular, regular and ostentatious events of gift-giving take place, much like the one described (see also Allard 2012; Lauer 2006; Rodríguez Aponte 2011). This dynamic was not lost on the Sanema, and was encapsulated by Eduardo’s statement, “Because we vote for the mayor, she gives us a motor.” Given that gasoline is required to run the donated machinery but also to travel to the cities with petrol-guzzling outboard motors, one could argue that patronage such as this swiftly embeds indigenous peoples in a circulatory system of citizenship and dependency. Gasoline is regularly procured but rapidly vaporized in the mere act of procurement and recurrent usage, which in turn generates further dependencies on the benefits that national society and political allegiances provide. As a potentially valuable voting constituent, their participation as citizens is crucial, and is indeed why indigenous people are supplied with a monthly quota of gasoline, which they must continually travel to the cities to obtain.⁹

The ID card is not the only document required for this milieu of political participation, although it opens the door to a world of patronage and the gifts that ensue. Procuring the ID card requires few skills; people need only to turn up to one of the *cedulaciones* (pop-up ID operatives) that occasionally appear in the larger Amazonian communities, and a *cedula* will be issued. It is the other documents—the

many forms, letters, application packs, and dossiers—with which people must regularly engage that necessitate more nuanced skills in bureaucracy and maneuverability. For Marco, mastering the more sophisticated government paperwork only became possible after he established a settlement further north and closer to national society in 2005. This move, he explained, enabled him to travel more regularly to Pijiguao, where he ultimately learned to “do the papers”, a skill he claimed to know nothing of before, despite a proficiency in reading and writing made possible through missionary education. He described himself and other such savvy maneuverers who similarly knew how to “do the papers” as “*civilizado*” (civilized) and “*preparado*” (prepared), terms associated with the frequently uttered Sanema phrase *setenapötō kua kua wina*: “to be like a *criollo*.”¹⁰ As these “civilized” Sanema become gradually more politically active, they find themselves embroiled in the next important step in their bureaucratic apprenticeship and the workings of Bolivarian participatory democracy: the communal councils.

Communal Council Papers and *Diligencia*

The continued encompassment of indigenous peoples into state mechanisms has been intensified by on-going Bolivarian projects that all Venezuelan communities are encouraged to set up: the *consejos comunales* (communal councils, CCs). As the trademark of Bolivarian endogenous development, communal councils are grass-roots projects that give decision-making powers to local citizens who set up and oversee local development projects in their communities. CCs are established through regular meetings (citizens’ assemblies) that elect an executive body, which then prepares and submits proposals for projects they wish to implement. Once accepted and certified, the CCs start to receive sizeable funds deposited directly into community bank accounts, which are used under the direction of the executive body. Heralding a move towards self-governance, communal councils work with the expertise and resources of community members who carry out and manage the projects themselves, rather than relying on private companies or government entities (see Ellner 2009; Wilde 2016). Since the passing of the Law of the Communal Councils in 2006, an increased number of indigenous communities in southern Venezuela have been setting up their own communal councils in order to receive funds to build schools and clinics,

establish and run cash crop initiatives, and purchase collectively held machinery. The initial deposits for the first three projects carried out in Maduaña—a school, a canteen, and a water purification system—amounted to 1,136,000 Bs.F. (approx. US\$142,000) in total—a sum that reveals why many are eager to register their own CCs despite the initial outlay required for *diligencia* (taxis, photocopies, and food in the cities).

Significantly, these projects ensure that administrative processes are a fundamental component of indigenous peoples' experiences of the state, as outlined by Ignazio, Marco's brother-in-law, when talking about his first experience with communal councils:

I didn't know what a "project" was, what a communal council was, what it meant to "organize" the community. Before I could work on the CC, I had to go to the *alcaldía* [municipal government] so that they could explain how to fill out the papers (*waheta tökö*) and how to do the *diligencia* [errands]—where to take the papers. I helped to form the CC, fill out the forms, and deliver them to the *alcaldía* in Pijiguao.

Ignazio's account emphasizes that bureaucracy does not involve the filling out of forms alone, but is a corporeal activity encompassed by the much-utilized term "*diligencia*" (errands), in which one must physically encounter the paper regime in a system of learned movements. Like Lund's account in Cuzco (2001), the complicated *diligencia* performed when preparing and submitting the communal council application pack necessitated judicious maneuvering within *criollo* cities, wearing smart clothing, cutting the hair short, clipping a mobile phone to the belt, and confidently marching around with a legal folder in hand. A prospective errand-runner must learn to navigate the towns, traversing one side to the other in taxis or buses, and searching out official stamps from various governmental institutions, each with their own cryptic names or convoluted acronyms. Numerous hours will be spent in lines, speaking Spanish, reciting ID numbers, signing names, and leaving fingerprints in the correct box. Often, movements such as these were distinct from the rapid trips to and from the cities with outboard motors, dominated instead by hours of inactivity, dawdling in waiting rooms, and shuffling in slow-moving lines.

I was not able to witness Marco or Ignazio completing Maduaña's communal council *diligencia*, as they had begun the procedure long before I arrived to conduct fieldwork, but I was able to follow the process with the community of Ulinuwiña, who were in the early stages of setting up a communal council when I visited them briefly in late 2009. I had arrived at the community in the wake of a Ye'kwana *promotor* (promoter) from the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples who had travelled to the region from the state capital to visit local communities and disseminate the Bolivarian ideology. Ulinuwiña had no outboard motor, and was located three weeks upstream from Venezuelan national society, so until then, residents had thought very little about state politics or projects. The *promotor* had arrived unsolicited and called a meeting in which he emphasized their need to "organize" through the formation of a communal council. He fleetingly presented them with the paperwork required to set one up, before promptly departing to continue his evangelizing ventures further upstream. The inhabitants of Ulinuwiña had heard tales of these *pasila palai*, the unprecedented floods of resources never before known and the origins of which were somewhat mysterious. They had seen many of the results of these so-called "projects" in their neighboring Ye'kwana communities: breezeblock buildings, generators, rapid outboard motors, and in some cases even tractors used for the cattle ranching cooperatives that had been set up in the savannahs. Naturally, they were eager to get involved.

I arrived to find the residents of Ulinuwiña attempting to make sense of the sea of papers they had been left with, and when I entered the communal house, the only literate man in the community, Valentín the schoolteacher, was sitting at a table in a murky corner slowly scrutinizing each paper with a countenance to match the gloom of his surroundings. Over a number of days he gradually assembled the forms, often attracting inquisitive crowds who stood agape, giggling or clearly unsure as to what he was doing. He took several days to slowly write over and over the list of community residents, their dates of birth and their ID numbers, which were required on 10 different forms and a staggering 31 pieces of paper. Next to their name on each form, residents were also required to leave a fingerprint, the stamp of the illiterate. This was, however, a ritual that many had learned to perform when obtaining their identity cards in a temporary *cedulación* (ID operative) that had appeared in a nearby community a year earlier, so were somewhat versed in the thumb-pressing action that

would inevitably become ever-more mechanical in the years to come. I noticed that Valentín did not seem to be calling any meetings or discussing the formation of a committee, only silently filling out forms, as though the projects would materialize, as it were, through their physical manifestation alone: paper.

I met Valentín again a month later in the state capital, Puerto Ayacucho, where he had hitched two weeks downstream in a Ye'kwana canoe to present the CC paperwork to the appropriate institution. I had arranged to meet him on the final few days of his *diligencia* when he would be seeking out the several signatures and stamps required to submit the registration pack. It was raining heavily when Valentín and his brother-in-law ran to meet me under the shelter of a supermarket awning. In contrast to his appearance in Ulinuwiña, where he would usually walk around in no more than a pair of torn jeans, Valentín now had a buzz cut and sported a brand new orange shirt. I could see, however, that this was as far as his meager funds would stretch, and the bright shirt seemed to draw attention to his tattered trousers and lack of shoes.

Once out of the rain, Valentín proudly extracted the bulging file from beneath his shirt where he had been keeping it dry. His CC registration was a thick stack of chaotic papers loosely contained within a dusty legal folder. As I leafed through I could see the complexity of what had been compiled: scores of papers requiring lists, narratives, and categories that seemed unfamiliar and opaque even to me. Just as I was noting the esoteric and legal parlance of many of the forms, Valentín uttered that he had been unable to decipher the language, and had had to seek assistance from a Ye'kwana acquaintance, Luis, whom he knew from a community near Ulinuwiña, and who happened to be in Puerto Ayacucho at the time. Luis had agreed to help in exchange for some of the CC funds when they came through.

As soon as the rain subsided, I flagged down a taxi to take us to our first destination of the day, only to discover that Valentín had been to Puerto Ayacucho only twice previously and had no idea where we were supposed to be going. He borrowed my mobile phone to again seek Luis' assistance, who instructed him to come to the offices of the *FUNDACOMUNAL* (the National Fund for Communal Councils) to "get certified." When we arrived, Luis was inside waiting for us, immaculately dressed with a smart leather conference folder in hand. He was perched on the edge of a table and chatting in fluent Spanish with one of the employees of the office; he was self-assured and undaunted by the official environment. Luis formed a

stark contrast to my two timid and hesitant Sanema companions who, now in the presence of Luis, became more passive, spoke little for the remainder of the day, and took a back seat in the proceedings. At times I wondered if they were aware of what was being discussed between Luis and the bureaucrats, as Valentín was often excluded from the conversations and had previously lamented to me his inexperience with the “ways of the *criollos*.”

After a few hours of waiting amidst a crowd of other hopeful indigenous peoples, the three men were called into a side room. Luis seemed to know the man who was to “certify” the paperwork and shook his hand while murmuring something into his ear. They emerged only minutes later with a look of relief and one stamped document satisfactorily attained. But the respite was only brief, as they suddenly realized that it was already 5.30pm and we still had to “register” the paperwork at the *Taquilla Unica* (Office for Paperwork Production) on the other side of the city.

We rushed there in a taxi, relieved to find it still open, only to come face to face with a frosty administrator who was in no hurry to help any one of the hopelessly expectant applicants lingering in a stagnant line nearby. His disinterested movements and body language were so deliberately unhurried that he picked up each paper in what seemed like slow motion. The minutes agonizingly slipped away, speedily approaching closing time, when Luis approached the counter with conviction, asking for a list of the application requirements. He was haughtily passed a sheet of paper stating that we needed to submit two copies of the application pack. I felt all hope deflate with this unexpected news as there was only one day remaining before the deadline, a day notorious in the city for being unbearably hectic and congested due to a deluge of indigenous peoples arriving from all corners to submit their paperwork. Ulinuwiña’s chances of registering their CC now seemed slim. Luis took it all in his stride, however, and we soon found ourselves in another taxi on our way to the photocopy shop. Squashed together in the backseat, Luis announced his plan for the following day. He explained that he had a friend who worked at the *Taquilla Unica*, so would arrive first thing in the morning to pass the application straight to this contact and avoid the final day’s crowds. “I know how these things work,” he stated with authority, “It’s important to know people who can help.” The last I saw of Valentín a few days later he reported that Luis had submitted the registration pack, and that as far as he knew it was being processed according to plan.

Voyaging for Knowledge

Valentín's case highlights that just as significant as the documents themselves are the movements required to become proficient in bureaucratic techniques: regular visits to the cities, daily *diligencia*, and "friends" who can expedite the process. However, maneuvering is not necessarily a new phenomenon, as frequent voyages in lowland South America have historically been pursued in one form or another as a way to enhance prestige and personhood (see examples in Butt Colson 1985; Carneiro da Cunha 1998; Hugh-Jones 1992: 67). Upon marriage and uxorilocal residence, in which the husband is the in-comer to his wife's community, male maneuverability and "attachments" in particular remain fluid (see Rival 2005). Among the Sanema, this meant that in the past men tended to have distributed social networks and voyaged frequently, particularly between affiliate communities that were clustered at walking distance from one another. Even to this day, journeying out beyond the community on a regular basis is of vital importance among men. During my fieldwork, men of all ages recounted a significant moment in their coming of age—in addition to their seclusion period (*manokosimo*)—being their first voyage to a distant Ye'kwana community, or even in some cases to the *criollo* frontier towns in the north.

In contrast to the permanent relocations of the past in which family groups would flee (*wasimo*) from disease, sorcerers, or raiders (*oka töpö*), individual and temporary voyaging for knowledge (*pö taöpo piasalo a hama huköle*, "travelling to know") was a voluntary activity of great honor. Such voyaging, often for the purposes of trading, but equally to "visit" (*nohimo*) or "see" (*mö*), is substantially connected to essential processes of "knowing" (*taö*) and developing valued wisdom. This voyaging for knowledge is articulated as a way to combat fear of other people and places, as during the pursuit of knowledge "the fear ends" (*kilipa mapa soma*). As such, a man who "knows how to travel" becomes regarded as fearless (*waitili*) and also often assumes the position of well-respected community leader (Colchester 1982: 90).

Not only was the powerful mythological creator figure, Omaö, described as a great traveler who regularly ventured to "where the waters reach the heavens" (Colchester 1981: 36), but shamans—men of great authority and wisdom—were also said to journey out into the forest or fly to other communities when in a trance, as

their spirit allies (*hikula*) “show” them distant and potent locales. They often intersperse their songs with wide, sweeping arm gestures and growling expressions—of *iiiamökö* (over theeeeere!) or *baibarrrrram* (faaaar away!)—that emphasize the great distances they must travel to encounter powerful beings who inhabit worlds somehow further than the imagination could stretch. Indeed, if shamanism is what Townsley describes as a “technique for knowing” (1993: 452), then what augments this knowledge is their ability to encounter and translate distant exterior worlds: a maneuvering *par excellence*. This value attributed to voyaging for knowledge emerges from an ethos of alterity in which things of the exterior are equally as desired as they are feared. Insofar as people outside the co-residential group in Amazonia are to some extent viewed with suspicion, they are also identified as “potential affines” (Viveiros de Castro 2001), and the exterior domain a source of social reproduction and knowledge. In this sense, the “other” is a vital component of the self (Viveiros de Castro 2012) and voyaging is essential to incorporating this alterity and, in turn, to developing true personhood, independence, and creativity.

In this sense, to say that the proclivity for mobility is impelled by a desire for goods, as was stated above, is only part of the story. It could equally be argued that trade is entered into as a means of establishing social relationships (see Ewart 2013: 46), and moreover, that these novel associations empower through the autonomy that they engender (see Killick 2009). Nevertheless, an eagerness for goods in and of themselves should not be overlooked as a motivation for voyaging (see Brightman 2010: 151); rather, goods and relationships should be seen as mutually constituting one another. What is evident is that, where the Sanema are concerned, voyaging for knowledge brings about new social relationships that generate access to goods, and that in the current context papers play an important role in this process. This very idea that social relationships and affiliations are manifest in documentation has been noted by Hetherington to be a salient experience among *campesinos* in Paraguay. Rather than taking an interest in the legal data or maps included in their land titling paperwork, the *campesinos* pointed to the signatures and seals that “traced networks of relations on the page” (Hetherington 2008: 52). It was the relationships that “spoke their reality” above and beyond the abstractions of the documents themselves. Like the Paraguayan *campesinos*, the Sanema subordinate inscriptions to the social networks involved, and often require those networks before the documents can be

procured. This is in part because papers tended to cause confusion, misunderstandings and disorder, as one Sanema man remarked, “In the past things were more basic, when there were no papers. Now things are difficult.”

The notoriously labyrinthine nature of Bolivarian bureaucracy often resulted in failures in “doing the papers,” but a lack of contacts also contributed to the problem. Many people illustrated the frustrations inherent in paperwork completion by recounting the story of Diego. Despite recently establishing a new community close to Pijiguao in order to access state resources, Diego had attempted to fill out the communal council registration paperwork several times without success. The tale tells of his humorous and slightly intoxicated rant at the papers that ended in him tearing them up in a frustrated rage while calling out to the sky, “Chavez! Chavez! Help me with my paperwork!” He was right in thinking that he needed help with these forms, but as a recent arrival to the area, his lack of acquaintances in Pijiguao or bureaucratic “friends” in the system put him at a disadvantage. Diego would certainly have benefitted from contact with one of the local Sanema *promotores* of the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples who are specifically employed to aid indigenous communities in completing their paperwork. Milton was one such *promotor* whom I often saw sitting outside his hut in the town huddled together with Sanema leaders to fill out their forms. Still, this “service” was not as equally available as it professed to be, often only attainable through kinship ties to Milton, or, failing that, gradually established relations of reciprocity. Diego might also have benefitted from closer affiliation with a Ye’kwana broker, like Luis, who helped prepare Ulinuwiña’s paperwork in exchange for a percentage of the funds received. Although these relationships are marked by dependencies and power inequalities, many of my Sanema friends described them as “friendships,” alliances valued as much for their social ties as they are for the material opportunities they provide.

Both of these contacts could have been established through regular “voyaging for knowledge,” a deep-rooted process, but which in the current context is facilitated by the outboard motor, the most prevalent political gift. In the contemporary context of state patronage, then, voyaging has shifted configuration. The visiting (*nohimo*) of nearby and affiliated communities on foot has now become a rapid to and fro to the cities, perhaps stopping to visit other communities along the way, and with esteem now arising specifically from a knowledge of the “world of the *criollos*.” This new

voyaging, predominantly experienced by young men (*hisia töpö*), is often propelled by state incentives and activities: formal education in the cities, football tournaments, workshops, and political events. By first participating in political patronage and Bolivarian projects, people are able to procure an outboard motor, engage in more rapid and extended travel, and thereafter more frequent interaction with the fertile world of the “other.”

As such, while voyaging in the past was a capacity available to all, it is now determined by access to an outboard motor, which rapidly enhances mobility and thus participation in state activities and *diligencia*. In light of the fact that community leaders—who perhaps gained their role because they already “know how to travel”—oversee, and safeguard communal possessions (see also Walker 2013: 121), it is easy to see why certain disparities in opportunities are developing within communities. These leaders became ever more powerful in their maneuverability; they regularly and rapidly travelled to and from the cities, and became enmeshed in a network of relations with people from afar. Women and community residents described as “poor” (*pebalo*) travelled far less frequently and often shorter distances. They journeyed infrequently to the cities (although women often accompanied their husbands), seldom spoke of doing *diligencia*, and tended to have fewer contacts outside of their kin or residential group.¹¹ As we can see, then, there is a new interaction with valued alterity emerging, and one that is accelerated in the current political context. Not only is it clear to see that physical and social mobility are intimately intertwined, but that the proclivity for mobility in the modern political context exists precisely because it conforms to traditional values of voyaging and the prestige that it augments.

Conclusion: The Interplay between Bureaucracy and Mobility

Sadly, neither Maduaña’s nor Ulinuwiña’s communal councils turned out well. Initially, the residents of Maduaña were able to buy numerous supplies, but they struggled to fulfill their plan of building a school and a canteen with the money that their communal council supplied. As the residents described it, a *rendición de cuenta* (external review) was conducted one year into each project, after which they were

both deemed inadequately managed and funds were “frozen” before the projects could be completed. For years, and even at the time of writing this, the buildings lay half-finished and collapsing in the harsh forest climate. I also later heard rumors that Ulinuwiña’s communal council had never received any resources due to their difficulties in opening and accessing their own bank account, a factor that Valentín had not taken into consideration when applying. In Maduaña, people grew increasingly disillusioned with Bolivarian projects, complaining that those elected to run them never complete tasks or fulfill promises, crucial moral assessments in daily Sanema life. Despite disappointments, however, by this point many in Maduaña had grown accustomed to the goods that such government funds could supply, and it was for this reason that Marco and many others decided to attempt the less mainstream but highly profitable enterprise of selling gasoline in the mine. The *guía* was the material manifestation of their new lucrative endeavors; the papers necessary to move within the region and ultimately continue to procure goods with the money obtained.

Whereas the people of Maduaña were able to transcend the failures of their initial bureaucratic endeavors, it is unclear to what extent those of Ulinuwiña were able to do the same. It could be argued that literacy is the primary factor determining the ability to harness such administrative ventures. It is certainly true to some extent that Marco was able to make sense of the documentation regime due to his upbringing in an evangelical mission community, which spatially and ideologically organized itself around two institutions that fetishized paper—the school and the church. However, while Valentín’s experiences with bureaucracy and *diligencia* in Puerto Ayacucho were undoubtedly a struggle, he was certainly not illiterate, as he too attended school in a Ye’kwana community as a child. The multifarious and opaque nature of government documents was a challenge encountered by both Valentín and Marco, and thus the difference between the two was more than a disparity in ability to decipher the terminology of such forms. Gupta (2012) argues against an overemphasis on literacy as the sole route from which to access political spheres, as the illiterate poor may have other means to sidestep circumscribed bureaucratic structures by procuring counterfeit documentation. To do so, however, one must have personal connections, thus highlighting how “symbolic capital, money capital, and social capital in the form of connections and kinship were all tightly linked together” (Gupta 2012: 228).

The difference between Valentín and Marco, as I understand it, was in their maneuverability: regular trips to and familiarity with the cities, experience in printing and making photocopies, dressing immaculately, using public transport, and perhaps most important of all, the maintenance of affable contact with bureaucrats who can push an applicant's papers through the system. When younger, Marco had travelled extensively to many *criollo* cities, including cosmopolitan centers in the north where the church headquarters were based. As outlined above, however, he learned to "do the papers" only after moving closer to Pijiguao and thereafter establishing networks of contacts within the bureaucratic systems. His maneuverability was facilitated and propelled by papers, and what's more, they widened his sphere of "friends" through the activities involved in *diligencia*, which enhanced his maneuverability further. Valentín struggled to accomplish many of the sophisticated *diligencia* tasks on his own partly due to his meager prospects for mobility: his community had no outboard motor and was located far from the cities, resulting in unfamiliarity with the "world of the *criollos*" and a dearth of reliable "friends" in the system. Nevertheless, his community's close association with Ye'kwana settlements enabled him to find a broker willing to help with the documentation, so that although he struggled, he nevertheless managed to succeed where Diego, who had torn up the papers in a frustrated rage, did not.

In many of the cases outlined here it was not the durability and formalization of documents that conferred power, or indeed the material documents at all. Unlike the treasured ornaments they came to be among the Chaco (Gordillo 2006), I was often startled to find books and documents abandoned in the dust within Sanema communities. Folded bible pages were used to store fish hooks, the plastic casings of ID cards were split apart, and photographs were scratched and worn beyond recognition. Papers did not seem to be cherished or safeguarded, but were left to disintegrate as though they were discarded leaves or castoff cassava bread. It seemed to be the bureaucratic techniques that became paramount, the "being like a *criollo*," the presentation of a particular ensemble of clothing, the bodily performance of *diligencia*, and the friends with whom one could shake hands. Often, valued papers would seem to appear from nowhere: they were not deliberated over, not read aloud, and not meticulously typed. Nevertheless, these documents had been procured through—but also had enabled—zealously established networks of powerful new

allies, the most apparent in the cases above being the Ye'kwana brokers who were involved in both Valentín's and Marco's *diligencia*.

The case of the Sanema demonstrates that while documents such as ID cards offer proof of identity as citizens of a nation, they also shape individuals as mobile subjects by permitting them to become visible and participating actors within the state apparatus. In southern Venezuela, this mobility has become more recurrent and rapid as the proliferation of outboard motors and endogenous development projects draw native Venezuelans towards national society. The Bolivarian Revolution in particular provided the Sanema with an apprenticeship in bureaucracy, which predominantly involved physical and social maneuverings, so that they were able to take advantage of opportunities both inside and outside the workings of the state. Even though it was gasoline and the outboard motor that directly facilitated this mobility, the fact that paperwork is required to procure and travel with motors and their fuel emphasizes the fact that paperwork and bureaucracy are integral to a new mobile Amazonia. Moreover, paper is a new material manifestation of the pursuit of fertile knowledge, and is indeed why bureaucratic processes were embraced, albeit with frustration; because they enable the Sanema to extend a maneuverability that has always been prized.

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Notes

¹ *Criollo* is the local term for non-indigenous Venezuelans or people of mixed heritage.

² My fieldwork was conducted between 2009 and 2011 in southern Venezuela. All place names and personal names in this article have been changed to protect the identities of the people involved.

³ While at the time the official fixed rate of exchange was 4.3 Bs.F. per USD, I am using the black market rate of exchange of 8 Bs.F. per USD in order to offer a more realistic account of the values presented here.

⁴ However, it seems that a lot of this money is used for bribe payments, paperwork, portage, and other costs along the way.

⁵ Limited space precludes a detailed historical description of the relationship between the Ye'kwana and the Sanema. However, it is important to note that the current dynamic stems from the backdrop of a long and intimate contact between the two (see Colchester 1982). Although there was a period of intensive raids between them in the past, since the 1930s the association has transformed into a peaceful patron–client dynamic, with the Sanema establishing settlements nearby and working in exchange for goods. The Ye'kwana have a longer history of contact with non-indigenous people, access to manufactured goods, and formal education in the cities. As a result, they currently dominate roles in prominent political institutions such as the ministries, municipal government (*alcaldía*), and tribal councils (see Lauer 2006).

⁶ “Yes with Chavez!”—denoting the yes vote for a referendum on changes to the constitution in 2009.

⁷ It must be noted, however, that Chavez's popularity was certainly not universal among the Sanema, with stories of upstream communities being “angry” with him for not supplying them with goods as he had others.

⁸ “Chavista” is the term used for supporters of Chavez's political party the United Socialist Party of Venezuela (PSUV).

⁹ The extent to which indigenous peoples can extricate, or indeed want to extricate, themselves from such dependencies is a discussion that requires more space than is available here. It is clear that dependencies are regularly pursued in Amazonia as a means to secure a consistent flow of goods (see Bonilla 2005).

¹⁰ See Kelly 2011, chapter 4, for a similar phenomenon among the Yanomami.

¹¹ That some Sanema were able to intensify their maneuverability over others is a result of a number of factors, and seems to be a matter of chance in many cases. However, the role of mediators is important—most significantly missionaries or Ye'kwana. Money, although not essential, may also facilitate mobility in the current context due to costs of food, transport, and clothing in the cities. Although *diligencia* is as yet not an entirely pervasive phenomenon among the Sanema, it does seem to be predominantly government-salaried schoolteachers who take on this duty, perhaps due in part to the small wage they receive, which they travel to the cities to collect.

